

by FRED INGLIS

Living in the End Times by Slavoj Zizek

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In Raymond Williams's fine and forgotten novel, *The Fight for Manod*, the dogged and incorruptible hero-Leftist says of his difficult, indurate, impassioned lieutenant (modelled, it is said, on Terry Eagleton) that "in the opposition there's only the opposition. That's why I can't be against him."

Slavoj Zizek exacts a similar allegiance. He looks down at us from the inexcusable dust-jacket photograph, black teeshirted, shaggy bearded, punitive, haughty, implacable, and we know we are for it. The end times have come (and they *have*) and Zizek will leave us naught for our comfort.

His loquacity is unstoppable. Two smaller books out in the past two years, pages and screensful of journalism, and now this: 400 pages of malediction, diagnosis, colossal knowledgeability, recondite anecdote. Zizek's is the biggest show in the academy, a vast marquee bulging with, for sure, vitality-in-the-present, wince-making scorn for one's own footling liberalism, quite dazzling swordplay with all the famous musketeers of Paris – with Alain Badiou, Foucault, Althusser, with his despised rival in controversy, Bernard-Henri Lévy, above all, with his master fencing-partner, the always playfully obscurantist, Jacques Lacan.

Given all this, given so much, it seems grudging to ask for a bit of order, for rather less of everything, for less repetitiousness and self-citation, for harder facts and tighter argument, as well as for not so loose and baggy a form in which to enclose quite so headlong and torrential a tirade. The style is the man, no doubt. But much of it and him is caught in the tale of a new reader of this latest effort who suggested that the title might better have been, 'Oh, And Another Thing ...'

As it is, end-times are what we have arrived at, so Zizek dreams up a form borrowed from Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's five-part sequence of anguish on learning that one is fatally ill.

Thus, in the first section it is the ideology of liberalism which lies prone in stricken denial of its imminent mortality, while secretly Dr Zizek reintroduces to us liberals the redemptive medicine of the dialectic and its inescapable materialism.

There is something heartening about the courage of a thinker who lived through the end times of communism in Slovenia and who is still prompt to remind his readers of the beauty in communism's primordial vision, who praises the wisdom of Deng Xiaoping for cannily introducing capitalism only at the controllable edges of the Chinese economy, who salutes (with a proper squeamishness) the achievement of the Naxalite Maoists in central India as having wrought a harsh polity out of degradation and dreadful squalor. (Nothing however about the far greater successes of Kerala's economy under the tutelage of that impeccable social democrat, Amartya Sen.)

After 'Anger' and a giddy, affecting dilation on recovering the meaning of love, as well as a marvellous aside on *The 3.10 to Yuma*, Zizek permits himself an 'interlude' on the roots of anti-semitism and on the monstrosity of Israeli actions in Gaza (fierce, this bit, and very good; but it's what *everybody* thinks). Perambulating around the globe with the large flung-out gesture of a big man not quite in charge of his body, Zizek permits himself extensive pub talk about the states of the European Union and the Irish vote against the Lisbon treaty (yes , he *does* and concludes it was all due to those awful bureaucrats in Brussels making everything too difficult to understand). He then tops this off with some very threadbare stuff about the impending self-destruction of the American Dream.

His turn from 'anger' to 'bargaining' (Kubler-Ross's third stage) is in contrast marked by so abrupt a change in register as to shake the whole edifice of the book. For Zizek, ardent and accomplished Marxicologist, now ventures an extended and timely restatement of the contemporary force and relevance of Marxism to the ruined political economies of the Western world, adding, as Theodor Adorno taught us, psychoanalysis to the brew and, in a powerful affirmation, convincing this reader at least that the dialectical contradiction between capital and labour has been dissolved by the victory of instrumental reason. Genially hitching a lift from Keynes, he proves the utter falsity of the adjective 'free' in 'free markets', and restores the 'fetishization of commodities' to its central place in an economy now dominated, as Guy Debord predicted 40 years ago, by the society of the spectacle. The trouble is that this very technical interjection belongs in a quite different book, as does the

extraordinary, no less technical and omniscient chapter on modern architecture and its tripartite class structure which follows.

So it's quite a jolt then to be landed in 'Depression', and merely depressing to meet the famous analyst, Catherine Malabou, bent in aid to explain the likelihood of mental unconsciousness even in our unconscious – hence the familiar modern figure of the human being bereft of all human feeling. What is more, isn't Zizek surprisingly uncritical - for so argumentative a man - of Kubler-Ross's divisions of misery? What about the omitted stages of self-awareness, at least, and courage at best, for we well know that our author is not a man who lacks courage?

But by now we are braced for apocalypse, and in it comes, leering horribly, dressed up as Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, obscene, decadent, mutated into Silvio Berlusconi, in a world in which climatic catastrophe will launch the dread horsemen, Famine, Plague, War and Death into an uncontrollable gallop.

One not unexpected canto of the apocalypse is Zizek's airy vision of genetic engineering and digital rapture, a passage which not only gives Craig Venter and his dreams of genomic transfiguration much more credit than the geneticists do, but permits Zizek himself more of his barmier digressions into science fiction. After that, 'Acceptance', presumably of the future and the end of history, is here played to thunderous rock music (which of course he knows all about) and scary movies.

All one can do with a book such as this is walk through its crazy, gripping, crowded streets and dizzying vistas, and hold one's nerve. It is built on a weird epistemology: Lacan's psychoanalytic structuralism is void of the dialectic. It generates nothing, it answers nothing. Talking cures cannot tell us, indeed must not tell us what to do. But Zizek's proto-Marxism is similarly immobile. If the point of a politics is not to describe the world but to change it, Zizek, still hopeful activist, offers no account of such action. Amazingly responsive as he is to the dark, whirling aspects of the world, he lacks all trust (in a phrase at which he sneers openly) in the common decency of peoples and its inextinguishable recurrence even in those end times which will, in their turn, one day come to their end.